



Karl Marx being arrested in Brussels, 1840s.

Marx: Theses on Feuerbach

Any one of the eleven short [Theses on Feuerbach](#) (attached) would be adequate on its own as a topic for discussion in a study circle. The most famous of them is the last one:

“Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”

The attached document shows Marx, in 1845, as being firmly in the camp of those humanists for whom the active, free-willing Subject is the centre and the starting point of all

philosophy and all politics.

It puts Marx in the opposite camp from those “materialists” who regard the human as derivative of, and secondary to, the purely physical. Marx never shifted from this strong and logical position. Marx poses the Subject in a dialectical relation with the Objective universe, but the Subject is the one with the initiative. The Subject makes things happen. The Subject can change the world – and that’s the point.

This is different from the idealism that ignores the material world, and it is equally different from the materialism that prioritises the mechanical over the mental. Thus, Marx settles the controversy over “dialectical materialism” right here, at the very beginning of Marxism.

Ludwig Feuerbach’s intervention into the philosophical debates of the early 1840s created a sensation in the intellectual crucible that included Marx and Engels as well as the “Young Hegelians”, with whom Marx and Engels were in the process of falling out.

Reading the eleven “Theses” reveals that Marx immediately recognised Feuerbach as a materialist, but also that he at once rejected Feuerbach’s particular and limited kind of anti-subjective materialism.

Thesis number two says that truth is a practical question. This is something that is repeated later on in the “classics” of Marxism. It reinforces the assertion that the world or universe

is a human world or universe. *“It is men who change circumstances”* says Marx in the third Thesis, and *“human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”*

The subsequent Theses develop this understanding through to Thesis 10 which says: *“The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or social humanity.”*

This is a good reminder that for Marx in particular, the term “civil society” only means “bourgeois society” [*bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*], and that therefore for Marxists, “civil society” is something to be overcome and transcended, and certainly not something to be put on a pedestal and worshipped.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Theses on Feuerbach, 1845, Marx.](#)
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